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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that explored how staff and parents experienced one school's environment, particularly, the relationship between the principal's caring leadership and the school's environment. The Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Center in Peoria, Illinois, served preprimary and primary grades. Seventy-five percent of the students were from low-income families. Data were obtained through observations, interviews with 61 staff members and 40 parents, and a survey of staff members. The words most frequently used by staff and parents to describe the school environment included "caring," "like a family," "warm," "nurturing," "challenging," "and "unique." The principal treated every person equally and with respect; did not limit himself or anyone else to a role; prioritized his time for sustaining relationships; supported and encouraged others as persons and professionals; listened and solved problems; and kept the mission focused and central. An implication for administrator preparation is that instructors can care for their students and share with them on an intellectual level about the complexity of caring. (Contains 16 references.) (LMI)

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Creating a Caring School Environment:

An Administrator's Story

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Creating a Caring School Environment: An Administrator's Story

On a starkly cold night the last evening in January, 1996, a circle of parents took my understanding of caring in schools to a new level. The meeting started inauspiciously, as 14 parents gathered for an opportunity to meet and talk with the principal of the Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center in Peoria, Illinois. The setting for what became an extraordinary discussion was a large room, about the size of a kindergarten classroom but furnished like a living room with comfortable sofas and chairs, end tables, and softly lit lamps. Comfortably seated, the parents from a pre-primary classroom and Ken Hinton, the Director /Principal of the school, talked informally about a whole range of topics. The importance of parenting and issues such as how to handle a child's jealousy of a sibling alternated with questions about the change underway from multi-age K-1 classrooms to separated kindergarten and first grades. Hinton shared some tales from his active growing up years and an easy give-and-take ensued. Parents dialogued with Hinton and each other about parenting, gave each other advice and comfort. The meeting was one in a series of classroom by classroom meetings Hinton had scheduled to get to know more of the parents and give the parents an opportunity to ask him questions.

Toward the end of the hour-long meeting Hinton began asking parents about their children by name, wanting to know how each was getting along. Eventually he came to the young woman sitting alone on one of the couches and looking pensive. "And how is your son?" he asked. She replied quickly with an air of serious discouragement, "Oh, he is just a demon child!" Immediately, the other parents responded. Four or five parents expressed concern about him, confirming that yes, he was a handful but each also shared stories about trying to help him, stories that demonstrated progress in his behaviors. One mother, who volunteered regularly in the classroom, described how she had developed a good

relationship with this child, how he would do things for her, how she had won him over. She looked forward to spending time with him whenever she was in the classroom. She said she thought of him as her special classroom project, reassuring the mom that he was improving. It was an genuine outpouring of support and empathy for a sadly discouraged young mother.

Hinton began to bring the discussion to a close as he reminded the parents never to give up on their children, always to be positive with them, that difficult behaviors are only for today. He emphasized with the story of Benjamin Carson, an African American neurosurgeon, how a parent's love and support can influence a life. Carson became a doctor because of the encouraging love of his mother, a woman who could not herself read. Hearing that story, the same mother who had spoken earlier about her efforts to help the challenging child confessed that she had not taken her own education seriously, said she wished that she had not dropped out. "I just don't know enough," she said, "and I feel so dumb when my daughter asks me something and I don't know the answer, and she says 'Why don't you know, Mommy?'" Ken, who had once been her teacher, responded encouragingly that he knew she would go back, that it was not too late to continue her education. Then he complimented all the parents for taking responsibility for each other's children. "Your children are learning about caring from watching you," he said.

When I began my study of the environment of this school, with a particular focus on the principal's contribution to creating a caring environment, I had anticipated finding that the principal, teachers and other staff members would be integral to the caring school environment, but I had not expected to find parents so actively involved in knowing and caring for each other's children. Both requiring and welcoming their involvement in the classrooms as well as a host of other activities, the school staff had drawn the parents into the circle of caring and recreated the reality of another time, when neighbors knew each other and watched out for each other's children.

Purpose and Place

The purpose of the study was to explore the environment of an exceptionally caring school, to examine how staff and parents experienced the environment, and to chronicle and analyze the contributions of the principal. I chose the particular principal and school because, as one former teacher put it, Ken Hinton epitomizes caring and I suspected that his caring leadership was a large piece of the school's unique environment. My interest was both practical and theoretical. Practically, as a professor in a preparation program for principals, I wanted to understand how his values, attitudes, and ways of working with others have contributed to creating a caring school environment so that I could share that understanding with students of educational administration. Theoretically, I wanted to deepen my understanding of the relationship between an ethic of caring and school reform, hoping my work might add to the emerging literature on caring and school leadership. Caring relationships have long been associated with good teaching, but "it is only recently that we have begun to find the ethics and politics of caring and nurturing associated with effective leadership " (Dillard, 1995, p. 559). Whereas Gilligan (1977) originally shaped the concept of an ethic of care as distinguished from an ethic of justice, Starratt (1991) wrote that "for an ethic of justice to serve its more generous purpose, it must be complemented or fulfilled in an ethic of love" (p. 195). He proposed that school leaders integrate the ethic of critique, with the ethic of justice, and ethics of caring. Writing about caring, he stated, "An ethics of caring requires fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, a loyalty to the relationship. Such an ethic does not demand relationships of intimacy; rather, it postulates a level of caring that honors the dignity of each person and desires to see that person enjoy a fully human life" (p. 195).

'Students don't care what you know until they know that you care' is a cliché familiar to teachers. Stated differently, caring is fundamental to learning because "caring relationships between teachers and students create possibilities -- opportunities for

academic as well as interpersonal learning to occur" (Noblit, Rogers & McFadden, 1995, p. 681). Recent research on brain processes has verified that "emotion is very important to the educative process because it drives attention, which drives learning and memory" (Sylwester, 1995, p. 72). By implication, Sylwester (1995) commented on the importance of a caring environment when he wrote that "emotionally stressful school environments are counterproductive because they can reduce the students' ability to learn" (p. 77). In another recent book linking brain research to learning, Caine and Caine (1991) explained the implications for education of the crucial link between emotion and memory:

> Teachers need to understand that students' feelings and attitudes will be involved and will determine future learning. Because it is impossible to isolate the cognitive from the affective domain, the emotional climate in the school and classroom must be monitored on a consistent basis. . . . In general, the entire environment needs to be supportive and marked by mutual respect and acceptance both within and beyond the classroom. Some of the most significant experiences in a student's life are fleeting "moments of truth," such as a chance encounter in a corridor with a relatively unknown teacher or, possibly, a "distant" administrator. These brief communications are often instinctive. Their emotional color depends on how "real" and profound the support of teachers, administrators, and students is for one another. (pp. 82-83)

Furthermore, a supportive caring environment minimizes both the reality and the perception of threat, thereby contributing to the relaxed alertness that facilitates learning. "The brain appears to be very much like a camera lens: the brain's 'lens' opens to receive information when challenged, when interested, or when in an 'innocent,' childlike mode and closes when it perceives threat that triggers a sense of helplessness" (Caine & Caine, 1991, p. 63). If caring can contribute to an environment that will make the difference between learning and positive school experiences, or frustration and alienation, then certainly the

creating and nurturing of a caring environment ought to be a primary focus of school administrators.

Noddings (1995) emphasized the link between care and learning when she argued that we should want more from education than academic achievement, but that "we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others" (pp. 675-676). She continued, "care must be taken seriously as a major purpose of schools; that is, educators must recognize that caring for students is fundamental in teaching and that developing people with a strong capacity for care is a major objective of responsible education. . . . Once it is recognized that school is a place in which students are cared for and learn to care, that recognition should be powerful in guiding policy" (p. 678). According to Lipsitz (1995), "Whether we acknowledge it or not, the presence or absence of caring determines everything relational in schools: what, how, and whom we teach and discipline; why and how we group students and organize the school day; whom we hire and how we prepare them; what and how we assess, whom and how we reward; and myriad other policies" (p. 686). Yet Beck (1994) reported cynical responses from colleagues to her research on the subject of caring in educational administration: for example, "'Caring and educational administrators -- That's really an oxymoron'" (p. 131). Beck has constructed a broad overview of caring as it relates to education administration, formulating three role labels to describe a caring educational leader: "(1) values-driven organizer; (2) capable and creative pedagogue; and (3) cultivator of a caring culture" (p. 78). Although Ken Hinton is all of those he is not explained by roles or labels. Rather his life and work illustrate Noddings' (1992) view that "caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors" (p. 17).

Kenneth Hinton was appointed Director/Principal of the Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center in Peoria, Illinois, in November, 1992, at age 46. The center had been in the planning stages for approximately two and a half years thanks to a far-

sighted board of education, superintendent, and a broad-based community steering committee. At the time of his appointment Hinton was principal of Harrison School, a Pre/K-4 building, primarily serving students who lived in Harrison Homes, one of three Peoria public housing projects for low income families. A full page of text and pictures in the local newspaper described his last day at Harrison. "It was the Friday before Thanksgiving, and the children at Harrison School had little to give thanks for. In small assemblies in the school gym, class by class, children sobbed as Ken Hinton told them it was his last day as their school principal" (Howard, 1992, p. B7). He read to all the children in small groups an open letter addressed "To my dear and most beloved children," believing the news would be well-received if he explained in person why he was leaving to become director of Peoria's new early childhood center. Still children and even some faculty cried because, in the words of a second grade teacher, "He loves children. He is supportive and caring about everyone. He's a wonderful man and we will all miss him. The children seem to know he (Hinton) is one-in-a-million, and they are losing him" (Howard, 1992, p. B7).

Several months after Hinton's appointment as Director/Principal, the Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center was named by the Peoria Board of Education, coincidentally, for his aunt. Valeska Hinton had been a prominent African American community activist. At the time of her death in 1991 she was eulogized as "the mother of the Peoria civil rights movement." She had served from 1963 to 1968 as the first executive director of the Peoria Human Relations Commission and also had been on the United States Commission on Civil Rights for 14 years. The school was designed as a model early childhood center and a professional development school to serve primarily an economically disadvantaged population. Although the building was named and under construction, program development was incomplete and staff yet to be selected. The program has been developed, staffed, and implemented through the leadership of Hinton, who has been a principal in the Peoria Public Schools since 1985. Also instrumental in the development

and implementation of the program have been Dr. Judy Harris Helm, Professional Development Coordinator, and Sandra Burke, Family and Community Liaison Coordinator.

The 1995-96 academic year is the school's third full year of service to approximately 350 children organized into pre-primary (3 and 4 year olds) and primary (5 and 6 year olds) multi-aged groups. Of the children, 75% must be from low-income families and these and other children are chosen through an admission process that involves a variety of criteria and considers children from the whole community, not just the school's neighborhood. The racial balance is 39% Caucasian, 59% African American, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. The school operates on a 12 month calendar, utilizing a continuous cycle of 9 weeks in session followed by 3 weeks off. This public school is the result of a three year planning and collaboration process involving the Peoria Public Schools, the City of Peoria Public Building Commission, local businesses, the community college, universities, and other early childhood programs in the city, including Head Start, YMCA, Urban League, and other child care centers. Well-known early childhood specialists Dr. Lillian Katz, University of Illinois, and Dr. Barbara T. Bowman, the Erikson Institute of Chicago, were consultants to the project and served on the steering committee.

Procedures

From September through February, I spent a total of 75 hours at the Valeska Hinton Center. Typically I spent a minimum of one day a week observing and interviewing with a total of 32 hours spent interviewing staff, 5 hours in private conversations with Hinton, 9 hours in parent meetings, 19 hours observing in the office, and 10 hours observing a variety of activities. In my own personal office mail box the secretaries placed copies of all information for staff and parents. These materials included the principal's weekly staff bulletins, parent newsletters, and other information about special events or deadlines. This descriptive case study (Merriam, 1988) is a result of the

six months of on-site data collection. Data analysis has been ongoing with emerging themes generated through inductive content analysis of observation field notes, interview notes and transcripts, and school documents (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In scheduled half-hour interviews all 61 full time staff members answered the same three questions: a.) "Please explain your role and length of time in that role here at the Hinton Center"; b.) "If you could only use one word to describe the environment of the Hinton Center, what would that one word be?" Follow-up questions to "b" were: "Could you tell me more about what you mean by that?" and "In what ways does the principal contribute to creating this environment?" If the person had chosen *caring*, "*the* interview ended after the follow-up questions. If a different word had been chosen, the person was asked: c.) "Is 'caring' also a word that would describe the environment of the Valeska Hinton Center?" Eight (13.11%) staff members interviewed chose the word *caring* as their single word descriptor of the school environment. All 53 persons who did not initially choose caring answered that caring was another word that described the school environment, and provided illustrations in response to the follow-up question, "In what ways or how does the principal contribute to a caring environment?"

The interviews having been completed, I circulated a written survey to collect other basic demographic information. Realizing that readers would be interested, but reluctant to describe the staff in terms of racial labels and divisions, I decided to see how staff members would answer the question "How do you describe your race/ethnicity?" They answered as follows: African American, 9; black, 8; Hispanic, 1; American, 2; Caucasian, 12; human, 1; white, 23; WASP, 1; Irish American Indian, 1; two "?'s", and one person left the space blank. Of the 61 full-time staff members interviewed, 5 are male and 46 female. In terms of age, the staff is composed of 15 persons in their 20s, 14 in their 30s, 22 in their 40s, 9 in their 50s and one person in her 60s. The staff consists of a professional development coordinator, family and community liaison coordinator, two secretaries, a lead teacher, 19

classroom teachers, two special education resource teachers, one art/learning center teacher, a speech pathologist, 14 teacher associates, a family educator, a home school facilitator, seven family support personnel serving in various roles, three custodians, five cafeteria personnel, a nurse practitioner, and a health center clerk. Teaching experience of the 19 classroom teachers ranges from 1 to 28 years, with 10 teachers having less than 5 years of experience; 5 teachers whose experience falls in the 6-20 years category, and 4 teachers in the 21-28 years category. Of the staff members, 45 (73.77%) are parents and nine of these have children attending the school.

In five to ten minute interviews a total of 40 parents, distributed equally among the four villages, were also asked the same questions about the school environment and the principal's contributions to it. These parents were interviewed either as they were coming into or leaving the building on regular school days, or at the series of classroom by classroom parent meetings held by the principal in January and February. The initial word choice of 5 (12.5%) parents was *caring*. With one exception, all of the parents whose initial word choice had not been caring, a total of 34 parents, agreed that caring was also a word that described the environment of the Center. The exception was a parent whose child had just been returned to her custody from the Department of Child and Family Services. Her first response was, "It depends. You have to mind your p's and q's." She was quick, however, to say that from her own experience, particularly with Mr. Hinton, she would have to say "yes," the environment was caring. In summary, 13 (12.87%) of the 101 persons interviewed chose *caring* as the best single word descriptor of the school environment.

Description of a Caring School Environment

It is not the building that creates the special environment of the Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center, although many people comment on the attractiveness of the contemporary 63,000 square foot single-story facility. The principal is quick to say, "we could do this in any building." The $7 million specially designed building does

provide children with an ideal setting for a best practices early childhood education featuring work sampling and the project approach. The classrooms are clustered into four villages, with the Yellow and Green villages on the east end of the building and the Red and Blue villages at the west end, each having its own adjoining outdoor play area. Persons entering the building from either the north or south doors walk into a spacious open central foyer with natural lighting from a large skylight. The area is always seasonally decorated and welcoming, with large festive flags hanging under the skylight. Other decorations, noticed as a person wanders the halls, are composed largely of children's work displayed with labels in such a way that the displays tell the story of how learning at the center happens. The walls are a warm ivory and the floor features a mosaic design of colored tiles that extends down the hallways, with yellow and green pathways going in one direction, and red and blue the other. These pathways make it possible for even the youngest children coming into the central foyer to find the way to their villages. The plan recognizes the folk wisdom of the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." Each child attending remains in the same village during the four years and all children from a family will stay in the same village throughout their stay at the center. Teachers also remain with a village, work together, and get to know the families well, thus providing the continuity that Noddings (1995) advocates in these words: "If we are concerned with caring and community, then we must make it possible for students and teachers to stay together for several years so that mutual trust can develop and students can feel a sense of belonging in their 'school-home' " (p. 679). Each village is decorated with the appropriate primary color and has 4-5 classrooms, a large teacher planning office, a village kitchen, and small planning office. In addition to the hallways leading in two directions to the villages, opening off of the central foyer are the Reception Office, Activity Room, Family Support Team Office, and Parent-Teacher Resource Library. Adjacent to these rooms, but opening off the side hallways, are the Sibling Care Room, Learning Library, Parent Meeting Room, Community Meeting Room, and a Staff Meeting Room.

Participating families must agree to be involved in their children's education through volunteering in the classrooms, creating a mission statement for each child, developing a family portfolio, and other active involvement in center activities. In return parents receive a wide variety of support and educational opportunities, including formal GED and college classes as well as more informal nutrition, first aid, and parenting classes, to name only a few. Sibling care is provided so that parents may conveniently take advantage of all these opportunities. An on-site health clinic, in cooperation with a local hospital, provides medical care to children and their families. Working parents enjoy the convenience of extended care before and after school, and all parents are invited to participate in a vast array of family social events. A Parent Advisory Council composed of representatives from each classroom meets regularly and provides parent input into policy, planning, and decision making.

Caring-Related Descriptors

A composite of the single word answers to the interview questions creates a rich description of the environment of the school. Words chosen by staff and parents in response to the interview question of what one word would you choose to describe the Hinton Center can be grouped into five categories. For each category, staff responses will be presented first, then parent responses. As stated previously, the most frequently chosen word was *caring*. Caring, chosen by eight staff members, and other words associated with caring comprised one category of responses. These other words were: *family*, chosen by six; *nurturing*, *love*, and *warm* each chosen by two; and single choices of the words *secure*, *stability*, and *welcoming*. A total of 23 choices (37.71%) were in this category. *Caring* was also chosen by five parents. Other caring-related words chosen by parents were *loving* chosen by two; and single word choices of *lovability*, *concerned*, *family*, *nurturing*, and *warm*. A total of 12 (30.00%) parent choices were in this category. Noted by many persons were feelings of welcome and warmth, an involvement of all staff in caring about and valuing the children and their families, as well as each other. Several

persons mentioned that the environment is about more than caring, that the appropriate word is love. In a lengthy interview, the principal was also asked what one word he would choose to describe the environment. Hinton answered, "I see our institution as in evolution, and I guess that the one word I would choose is ***nurturing***." He continued:

> Human beings need to know they are loved, respected, and cared for before you can really make an impact on their lives. I think whenever you have an opportunity to work with children or people, and you are an educator, you have to realize that is what you are doing, you are impacting the life of another individual who has that need to be loved, respected, and cared for. In other words, if I am going to work with you and be very productive and have a high quality and meaningful relationship, I need to know that there is more to it than a business or professional relationship. I would like to feel that when I do something with or for that person with whom I am working, it is going to enhance the being or the purpose of the life of that individual. I think that is why I see our institution as being a nurturing institution, because I think nurturing is an intricate part of learning and human development. . . . I guess that what I am saying is that we give importance to the quality of relationships that exist not only between teachers, but between teachers and custodians, cafeteria people and custodians, and vice versa, because they are so impacting on what eventually happens to the children, because we model for the children and if we as adults cannot model what we want them to do it serves no purpose. Basically, what I would like to see take place is we need to live what we teach. We need to live what we want the children to do.

I include this lengthy quotation because Hinton's beliefs about what people need and the importance of human relationships is central to who he is and how he does things. Put another way, it is important to him that the environment nurture the growth and development toward wholeness of all persons on the staff so that each will be able to pass that nurturing along to the children and their families.

Affective Focus Descriptors

A second category of words highlighted affective qualities that do not directly relate to caring but describe other affective aspects of the environment. Staff's single word choices in this category were: *commitment*, *dedicated*, *energetic*, *enthusiastic*, *hopeful*, *invigorating*, *involved*, *motivated*, and *peaceful*. A total of 9 (14.75%) choices belong in this category. Parents' had five (12.50%) single word choices in this category: *comfortable*, *encouraging*, *friendly*, *happy*, and *uplifting*. The environment is energetic and enthusiastic as staff involve themselves in caring for each other, the children, and their families. Said one family support person, "Everything is always so positive. I was real impressed the first day and week how everyone smiled and spoke to you, how everyone was always willing to do things, and it carried through the whole year." The school offers children stability, a secure and peaceful environment. Said one of the secretaries, "It's hope that we get here that we don't get anywhere else. We know we can do better, that we can uplift the families and the children. There is nothing we can't achieve because of so much hope, inspiration, positive energy that is contagious for everyone who steps in here." A teacher, explaining her choice of the word 'dedicated,' summed it up, "the vision is so deeply embedded in all of us."

Program Focus Descriptors

A third category of words were program focused descriptors. *Busy* was chosen by three persons, one of whom said "It's always hopping at the Hinton!" *Challenging* was chosen twice. Other words each chosen by one staff person were: *collaborative*, *diverse*, *educational*, *child-focused*, *family-oriented*, *open*, *teacher-friendly*, and *teaming*. A total of 13 (21.31%) choices belong in this category. Words each chosen by one parent were: *challenging*, *enriching*, *family-oriented*, *individualized*, *open*, and *rewarding*. A total of six (15.00%) parent choices belong in this category. The environment is collaborative, child-focused, and family-oriented. Many staff members spoke of a commitment to deliver a quality program that meets all of the children's needs --physical, academic, social and

emotional. The program is delivered because of the commitment of the staff and in spite of obstacles, such as a lack of full funding that periodically affects staffing. The commitment to the mission of serving children and the full range of their developmental needs is real and neither that commitment nor caring stop when the children leave to go home.

Over-All Quality Descriptors

In a fourth category were words that provided over-all quality descriptors of the program. *Awesome* and *wonderful* were each chosen by three staff persons, with *exciting* chosen by two. In this category, other words each chosen by one person included *fantastic*, *fascinating*, *good*, and *great*. A total of 12 (19.67%) choices were in this category. A word chosen by seven parents was *excellent*, with *great* chosen by three. In this category, other words each chosen by one parent included: *beautiful*, *fantastic*, *magnificent*, *stupendous*, and *wonderful*. A total of 15 (37.50%) parent choices were in this category. One enthusiastic staff member called the school "the perfect place for young kids to start off." A secretary elaborated her choice of 'awesome' by saying "this is truly the way I feel every school should be, where everyone is part of a team -- children, faculty, parents, and community. When we care for mom and dad too and build their skills and knowledge, make them part of their children's education, help them want to do better, then we are going to be able to turn things around." Another person emphasized that "children learn faster here and it's not just the equipment." The professional development coordinator, calling the school 'exciting,' focused on ways the school is "cutting edge" with all the best practices of early childhood education happening under one roof.

Non-Traditional Focus Descriptors

Finally, in a fifth category were words that focused on the non-traditional nature of the center. The words were: *different*, *innovative*, *own-little-world*, and *unique*. A total of 4 (6.56%) choices complete this final category. Two (5.00%) parents also chose the word *unique*. As a teacher associate explained, "We are always trying different teaching techniques because we feel this will help the children learn better." The teacher who said

the center was its 'own-little world' explained that she meant inclusive or comprehensive. She elaborated that she found the school hard to describe; "It's a place where we deal with everything -- teachers, teacher development, students, students development, parents, parent development. It's not just for children. Sometimes I forget it is just a school, because so much happens here." Another staff member chose unique because "there are very few schools that exist today that provide young children opportunity to develop in areas of social, physical, emotional, and academic skills."

Discussion and Summary

Table 1 presents the total numbers of responses per category for staff as a group, parents as a group, and staff and parents combined to the question, "If you could only choose one word to describe the environment of the Valeska Hinton Center what word would you choose?"

Table 1

Numbers of Staff and Parent Responses by Category for Words Describing the Valeska Hinton Center Environment

Category	Staff	Per Cent	Parents	Per Cent	Total Number	Per Cent
I. Caring Related	23	37.71%	12	30.00%	35	34.66%
II. Affective Focus	9	14.75%	5	12.50%	14	13.86%
III. Program Focus	13	21.31%	6	15.00%	19	18.81%
IV. Over-All Quality	12	19.67%	15	37.50%	27	26.73%
V. Non-Traditional	4	6.56%	2	5.00%	6	5.94%
TOTALS	61	100.00%	40	100.00%	101	100.00%

Clearly, for both staff and parents the caring aspects of the environment loom large. As one person put it, "Everyone in the center cares about the children and their families as well as each other and you see it in what they do." Interestingly, the largest category of responses for parents were those over-all quality descriptor words such as *excellent*. In elaborating on their choices, parents typically connected the quality of the program with the caring environment. For example, one parent said, "It's like the family that children need when they are away from their parents. It's great!" Another parent said, "It's like taking my child to a relative's house. I don't have to worry about him. They take care of everything here." Teachers were praised by parents. One parent said, "Teachers here teach from their hearts, not for the pay. You can tell they really love to teach." Finally, several parents mentioned the growth they had observed in their children, that they were learning socially as well as academically.

Table 2 lists all the words that were chosen by *both* staff and parents to describe the environment. To summarize, these ten words, agreed upon by staff and parents, do describe the environment of the school. The school is fundamentally *caring*. It is like an ideal *family*, both *warm* and *nurturing*, offering *love* in a variety of ways to all who enter. The school is *wonderful*, *great*, and a *fantastic* place, offering a program that is *challenging* -- a non-traditional *unique* school.

Table 2

Words Chosen by Both Staff and Parents to Describe the Valeska Hinton Center Environment

Category & Word	No. of Staff	No. of Parents	Total	% of Total (N=101)
I. Caring Related				
Caring	8	5	13	12.87%
Family	6	1	7	6.93%
Love	2	3	5	4.95%
Nurturing	2	1	3	2.97%
Warm	2	1	3	2.97%
II. Affective Focus (No words chosen by both staff and parents)				
III. Program Focus				
Challenging	2	1	3	2.97%
IV. Over-All Quality				
Wonderful	3	1	4	3.96%
Great	1	3	4	3.96%
Fantastic	1	1	2	1.98%
V. Non-Traditional				
Unique	1	1	2	1.98%
TOTAL			46	45.54%

An Administrator's Story

What has been learned about how the principal Ken Hinton has contributed to creating the caring environment of the Valeska Hinton Center? I began my study in early September by spending an entire day at the school, arriving at 6:45 a.m. to find Ken walking down the hall and some children already there. Much of what I discovered through six months of interviewing and observing was embedded in my notes from that day. A brief overview of the day captures Hinton as an example, in his respectful non-role bound interactions with people, his use of time, encouraging manner, problem solving, and commitment to children.

Hinton's personal office opens off of what is called the Reception Office, one of four doors opening off the central foyer. The building has no teachers' lounge, by design, so much informal visiting happens in this office throughout the day, but particularly in the morning as teachers check their boxes and other staff arrive. Ken's personal office door was only closed twice the entire day, once for a brief meeting with a secretary and once when he was meeting with someone about a confidential matter involving a social service agency and a family. He was just as likely to answer or talk with people on the phone in the Reception Office as in his personal office, and this added to the feeling of everyone being an equal member of the team. Everyone was welcomed warmly in this office, including children. I counted ten children who sought out Ken to say hello or show him something and get a hug before he left for a district meeting about 9:15 a.m.

When he returned about 11:30 a.m., he talked with Jackie about the copy machine replacement, asked her to send flowers to a funeral, and seeing a need made a quick decision to take home the Russian-speaking grandmother and child who were having to wait because the "Door-to-Door " van was not coming as scheduled. Back in about a half hour, he sat at the secretary's desk and made a call about getting something fixed in the air conditioning system. His next interaction was with a parent who dropped in because her son was not supposed to be having breakfast, but was being charged anyway. He said he

would take care of it, and had done so before the day was over. He welcomed Dr. Lillian Katz from the University of Illinois, who was there to work with Dr. Helm; then hearing a child crying, he said, "I'm going to go see who that is." He followed the sound to a pre-primary classroom, went in, talked kindly with the child, hugged her, said "I can't do my work when I hear you crying. You take your nap now," and was quickly back to the office, almost immediately confronted with a teacher seeking his advice about a particular child. About an hour later another child came into his office, brought down by a teacher associate who reported that he had thrown pencils. Ken, on the phone in his personal office, acknowledged the child by touching him on the shoulder, and let him just roam around the office. When finally off the phone, he asked the child to sit in the chair in front of his desk, and on his knees talked very quietly with the child while he retied the child's shoes. Then he went on about his work, eventually telling the calmed down child it was time for him to go back to class.

The rest of the afternoon was a stream of people, phone calls, and projects, including arrangements for a faculty meeting on teaming facilitated by the lead teacher, Sallee Beneke. He answered the phone in the Reception Office and even made several photo copies. Everyone who came into the office was welcomed and greeted by name, either by Ken, or secretaries Jackie Petty and Micheline Pascal. As school ended and the children went to the busses or were picked up by parents, another flurry of children came in and out of the office to tell Mr. Hinton good-by, show him their papers, and get hugs. I counted interactions with 25 children that day, mainly student initiated. All children were greeted by name and most praised for something. Ken clearly did not consider interactions with the children interruptions, whether they were the eager children wanting their morning hugs or misbehaving children. Ken moved easily from a conversation about a request to go to Chicago to attend the meeting of the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood to a conversation with Micheline about diet soup and exercise, promising himself to start tomorrow. He filled the soda machines, and talked with several parents. When both

secretaries left at 4:00 p.m. he answered the phones in the Reception Office, talked with teachers as they left, and greeted persons coming for a prenatal class, one of several educational parent events scheduled for the day. In the entire day I did not hear one negative thing said by anyone about any situation, child, person, or family. When I left at 4:45 p.m., my mind and notebook full, Ken was still there.

Ken Hinton is a challenge to capture in words. His caring is a way of being in relationships, an ethical commitment, an expression of love, and a mission. He is on the one hand caring and kind, but also a man with high expectations of himself and others, tough and politically astute, with seemingly endless energy and willing to do whatever it takes to make life better for his children, to make the school successful. What does he contribute to making the school environment caring? In the words of one teacher, "Everyone knows he cares for them, cares about the mission, the people doing it, and the children. Everybody knows his heart is in this project." How do they know? "By the way he is and does things, " said another person. In the words of a secretary, "Ken believes in what he is doing, loves what he is doing, and it shows in everything he does." A teacher associate said, "He puts himself on the line, being a model he practices what he's teaching. What he asks us to do, he will do. What he asks us not to do, he won't do." Yet another person put it this way, "His caring is as an integral part of the team. He may be the leader but he is not at the top of the mountain. He's right there in the circle with the rest of us. He cares about children whether they go here or not. He is so caring about the kids and staff, and committed to making life better for all kids in Peoria, not just the children here." Over and over again the words *by example* and *as a role model* were used to describe how Hinton contributes to the caring environment. Analysis of the comments and anecdotes offered as illustrations of how he is an example suggests six deceptively simple descriptive statements. First, and of primary importance, is that he treats every person equally and with respect. Secondly, he does not limit himself or anyone else by or to a role. Third, his use of time reveals his priorities. Fourth, he supports and encourages

others as persons and professionals. Fifth, he listens and solves problems. And finally, he keeps the mission focused and central. Each statement will be elaborated.

He treats every person equally and with respect.

All people are important to Ken and deserving of respect regardless of age, position, or economic status. In one of our philosophical conversations, exploring the connection between caring and justice, Ken said he saw justice in terms of morality or spirituality, as "a right of the essence of a person to be respected." This conviction is at the heart of who Ken Hinton is and of his relationships with others. In a secretary's words, "He treats each of us as if we were as important as anyone, regardless of what we do or our titles. He treats us with respect and dignity and makes each feel as important as the next." A total of 30 people made this same point in describing how Hinton contributes to the caring environment. Following are a few examples. "He shows genuine respect to everyone who comes in the building," said one teacher, whereas a teacher associate put it this way, "I have never seen Ken treat one child different from another, not a child or a parent." Looking from another angle, a teacher said, "He loves kids completely and that love causes kids to give him respect. The staff and kids both respect him more than other principals I've known." Describing the effect of Hinton on children, one teacher said "the students just adore him. They glow when he comes into the room." I was reminded of Noddings' (1984) statement, "When the attitude of the one-caring bespeaks caring, the cared-for glows, grows stronger, and feels not so much that he has been given something as that something has been added to him" (p. 20). A person who works in the cafeteria said, "Kids are from difficult home settings, but he does not treat one person better than the other, he treats them all the same." A parent said, "He accepts and adopts these children as his own."

That the parents are also recipients of respect from everyone begins with Ken. In the words of the home school facilitator, "He encourages us to have respect for parents and to encourage parents to participate because he feels they are an important part of the

school." "I have never seen a child or a parent turned away because they didn't fit in. Everyone is made to feel they fit in," explained a member of the family support office. Said a teacher, "Parents feel confident that they can come here with a problem and get some help, not as charity but because they are cared about." Several others talked of how accepting he was of families and children no matter what their circumstances.

The respect continues even when Ken disagrees with a teacher or is disciplining a child. A staff member put it this way, "If you're wrong he will discuss it with you, speak to you about it, but his delivery is in such a way that you almost thank him for it." Several mentioned how he never raises his voice, but gets his point across. One person commented that "if he does not like something, he will say something once in a positive way and you will never hear about it again." Another teacher said, "Ken constantly lets me be me and my children be children, yet redirects my children and me when I need it in a firm but kind way, never demeaning or belittling." Children coming to the office for disciplinary reasons usually get hugs as well as questions and a talk. As one staff member described it, "I had to take a couple of kids in for discipline. He started out with a hug and said how nice it was to see each child. Then he got down on their level and asked questions, what could they have done -- not preaching, but trying to teach them to be in charge of themselves." One custodian summed it up: "It's how he treats people that I really admire."

<u>He does not limit himself or anyone else by or to a role.</u>

Dr. Judy Helm, Professional Development Coordinator, in talking about how Sandra Burke, Family and Community Liaison Coordinator, Ken, and she function as an administrative team emphasized that "what is here is so complex. There are many things Ken does that no principal would do. Roles here are overlapping. It is not a traditional principal's role." Other staff provided many illustrations, such as Ken's helping with clean- up after the Charlotte's Web program, buying children shoes with his own money, using the school washer and dryer himself to take care of cleaning up clothes for children,

braiding a girl's hair, pulling weeds with the custodians when it was 102 degrees, changing and cleaning up children who have accidents, hauling the soda pop and filling the machines, subbing for teachers, fixing the ditto machine, and helping out in the kitchen. Although several persons saw him as a father figure in the school, he was also called leader, fellow teacher, colleague, and friend. One teacher associate described how children respond to Hinton by saying, "He's like a magnet. The children want to connect with him. They can touch him and talk with him. He's not just a figure head, 'the principal.' " A teacher said something similar: "I see him as human, not just a principal." Another teacher told about her first week at the school. "I had a bad day and I was completely distraught but I didn't feel foolish to be in his office in tears. It was like talking to a more experienced friend." Teachers and others appreciate the welcoming office atmosphere, with one teacher associate saying "there's no other office like this. It feels comfortable. You can chit-chat. It's not off limits." As a teacher put it, "Ken does not have professional distance."

Ken's willingness to do whatever needs to be done creates a ripple effect. As one teacher explained it, "he does not say that's not my job. He's done everything. When you see someone that high up doing anything and everything it inspires the rest of the staff to follow suit." Hinton both practices and articulates this value. One teacher reported that he devoted time at a recent faculty meeting to the idea that "nothing is just someone else's job and not yours." He puts the emphasis on "taking care of all the children, not just those in your classroom," said a teacher associate. "We are not just teachers in our classrooms but in the whole school. If a child from another village is running in the hall, we are to stop and give that child a hug, or if a child is wandering, or crying, or upset, we are encouraged to stop and see where the child should be." It is not just the teachers who have internalized this value. "The secretaries are part mothers, grandmothers, aunts -- not just secretaries. If a child comes in with a sad face, they push the secretary job aside and give the child love. Even a maintenance man drilling a hole will stop if a child comes in crying and will attend to the child, or attend to a parent needing advice," observed a person from the family

support office. When the principal is not confined to acting from or within a role and responds as a caring person to a whole variety of human needs, then everyone else in the building is empowered to care. Hinton empowers professional growth similarly, "leaving doors open for people to develop their positions and not limiting them to old ways," said lead teacher Sallee Beneke, as she described what he told her when she began her work at the center: "You have the ability. I'm giving you the power. Whatever you can do I want you to do it."

His use of time reveals his priorities.

Many mentioned the countless long hours Ken spends at the center, noting his coming early and staying late, going to all the village functions, and spending time on weekends. One teacher said, "Ken shows that he cares by his commitment to the children, by giving up his time. He doesn't ask us to stay and then he goes home." A teacher associate summed it up with "he goes above and beyond the call of duty. He inspires us to be a dedicated team because he is so dedicated to what he does. He is like a model for us. He puts in long hours and does anything to keep us happy so we can do our job." Several others commented on how even his off-duty time "is spent in caring in the community, at different events separate from our school, the Boys' Club and other types of events in the community." Staff are aware that he spends time on much behind the scenes work that they never know about. Another interesting observation about use of time by a teacher was that "Ken makes sure that you have extra time, or will make time for someone to go the extra mile, in a situation with a child or family that needs a lot of care."

The long hours show his priorities, but so does his practice of dropping everything if a child, parent, or teacher has a need. "He is always there for us. I know that I can go to him at any time, or call him at home, " said a teacher whose comment is representative of at least a dozen others. Another said, "When I get stressed, I have no problem knocking on his door. Even with piles of paper on the desk he never puts me off, but is always there to listen and give you feedback." Five mentioned that he was really busy, but "if you need to

see him you can." Said another, "Truly he is the first principal I've worked with who was available to talk over professional issues." Secretary Jackie Petty said, "I have never heard him say no to a person who says, 'Could I have a minute?' He always has time, no matter what he is doing, an appointment with the superintendent or any other important meeting. If the building were on fire and a kid said, Mr. Hinton I need to ask you a question, he'd sit down and talk." His actions consistently demonstrate the importance of the children. "The world stops when a child walks into Mr. Hinton's office. He has so many administrative things to worry about, but the children come first," said a teacher. When the children come into his office before and after school "for hugs and their chats, no matter what is happening he will stop. He will stop and talk with the parents, too," said the home school facilitator. The numerous comments about his willingness to stop everything when people need to talk with him show his high regard for people and their needs.

A final two examples are not about stopping everything for a need, but of choosing to use time in ways that honor emotional needs. Once last year he called a meeting of a group of teacher associates around lunch to hand out pink slips, necessitated by yearly funding uncertainty. Said one of them, "I was touched by his taking the time to explain what it meant. He said we were too valuable just to pass out envelopes. I found out later that he gave up going to the Joyce Brothers' community-wide luncheon where he was supposed to get some kind of an award." A second example involves a small child who wandered in off the street, just filthy, no socks and with coat and shoes caked with mud. He only knew his name and how old he was, not where he lived. Ken took the child into the bathroom and got him all cleaned up. He found clean clothes for the child, some socks and a clean coat. Ken personally took charge of finding out where the child belonged, eventually locating him as having strayed from a nearby Head Start program. He took the child home and had a talk with the parents about not just dropping their child off somewhere without waiting to watch the child go inside. The child did not ever cry, sensing that he was in a safe place when he was at the center. These two examples

illustrate Hinton's willingness to put himself and his activities aside to attend to the needs of children and adults.

He supports and encourages others as persons and professionals.

A teacher spoke what others also expressed when she said, "When I walk into the building I feel respected as a professional but also as a person with a private life that is not always perfect." Another said that Hinton "sees us as individuals with individual needs and takes that into consideration all the time." In slightly different words, "he sees us as individuals not just a group of teachers." His support is always there for anyone confronting a crisis. There were numerous examples, including the teacher he took to the hospital after she got a phone call that her mother had just been hurt in a serious car accident. When this same teacher's father had surgery he made sure that she understood that it was okay to leave school to be at the hospital. Another teacher appreciated the ride to school when her car broke down. Several persons mentioned his understanding when there had been family illness, including the person who said he was "thoughtful to me personally when my grandchild died, very supportive." Said a custodian, "he helped me personally through some serious times in my own life." "He cares about everyone here and everybody knows it," said a teacher associate.

But just as meaningful is his consistent friendliness, the "how are you, how is your day going" greeting. "There are a lot of busy people who overlook that sort of thing," volunteered a teacher. One person spoke of her trust in him: "He takes an interest in my personal life too. I could discuss anything with him. I have had some problems and the door was always open for me. He gave me advice and guidance. He will go out on a limb for you. When I was pink slipped my first two years I knew he would do everything possible to see that I'd be back. When he gives you his word, its gospel." Another expressed this same strong level of trust when she said "You can talk with him privately and he'll keep it confidential."

He also expresses concern for the physical and emotional health of staff members, "cares whether we see our families," said one person. "He values people's emotional commitments" said the lead teacher. He responds to people who are ill or need time off very positively, always saying "I am supportive of whatever you need to do," said a teacher associate. Another put it this way, "if one of us on the staff gets sick he asks us to go home and take care of ourselves. He cares about the health and safety of the teachers as much as the students." Sometime he just tells teachers to go home, or as a teacher said, "Caring is Ken listening carefully to staff and saying go home at 4 or 4:30 and 'no more meetings.'" He also is quick to appreciate the staff, with several mentioning how he often compliments them both individually and as a group. Others spoke of how his "telling us how important we are" boosts self esteem.

In addition to his personal support, staff receive a high level of professional encouragement, are respected and treated as professionals. One teacher called him "honest and up front." "He's been like a mentor to me. He gave me all the confidence I needed," said one of the first year teachers. Another teacher reported that he is "behind the staff 100%. He will stick up for you without knowing what it's about." "He's the first one to be our advocate," said another. Speaking more specifically, several teachers spoke of his way of listening to their new ideas, talking through their ideas with them, and then encouraging them to try things. "He is willing to let us try something even if he does not think it will work. He listens to all the arguments, then lets us try it. He is open to our way of doing things" is a good summary of what several said. In addition to supporting teachers' ideas, "when you go to him with a new idea he will work with you to get resources. He tries to get materials that aren't here routinely. He encourages us to do anything that will help the children learn in a better way," a teacher associate explained. "He fights, fights, fights so you have the resources you need. He supports, praises, and goes to bat for you constantly. You respond, yes I can do this," a teacher elaborated. The art and learning center teacher described how when she interviewed he asked her to

describe the perfect room, and then he let her create it. "If I have an idea he will support it and I can carry it out as far as I want," she said with pride as she talked about her kiln. A teacher associate spoke of his encouragement to her to go to school, take classes, saying "he stimulates me and keeps me going to try new ideas. He is a driving force and does not settle for mediocrity." Teachers feel he that he listens and is fair. "I have never heard him speak of a teacher to another teacher in a negative way. He is a very professional person," said a teacher associate. Almost every staff member interviewed spoke of feeling encouraged and supported by Hinton both personally and professionally.

The support and encouragement from Ken is passed on. "He does the teaming at the building level and then we do the same thing in our villages," said a teacher. Secretary Micheline Pascal said "Even if you feel down, he's an inspiration. He is so positive that you have to be too. He has a positive spiritual demeanor and sees goodness in everything and everyone. He always looks at the positive. That is contagious if you are around it every day. It rubs off." "Ken is a caring person and cares for the staff and that probably passes down," said a teacher associate. This final comment by a teacher pulls together his concern for the personal and professional and extends the circle of caring to the community. "He has a good feel for what is going on, for where the school is going, for the parents and children, and not just academic achievement but also the personal and social links that need to be found between the school and community. He knows his people, the staff, parents, and children."

He listens and solves problems.

One of the persons from the cafeteria made the connection quite directly between caring and problem solving when she said "he is a great person and cares a lot about the kids. You see how he cares because he takes care of problems. By the way he says and does things you can tell he cares." The health center clerk said that "he sees needs that maybe other people can't see and goes about the process of making changes in the lives of kids that are positive. He doesn't let situations just remain, but goes about trying to better

things for children, staff, for anyone." This sensitivity to problems, even minor problems, writing them down and taking action in response was described by many persons interviewed. As a teacher said, "He follows through with everything." Many spoke of his writing things down and knowing that their concerns would be addressed.

His decision making processes for anything major typically involve careful listening, looking at a situation from all sides, getting input and involving others, and then taking a problem or concern all the way to resolution. After we toss things around, "he goes with the majority most of the time. Sometimes he says this is the way it will be. That's his job." He talks with staff individually and in groups, "needing to get everyone's opinion before he can be effective," a teacher explained. He encourages and makes time for collaboration and village meetings. Said the head custodian, "we all have a say in what goes on here. So many places don't even ask the opinion of people who will do the job." Besides asking everyone for an opinion Hinton can also be counted on to take the children's side, several persons mentioned. Staff described how he likes to bring problems and conflicts out in the open so we can talk about things constructively. Similarly, a teacher said, "Ken is always bringing to light what the other person may be feeling in a situation." In helping resolve problems, "He always takes a very positive approach. I have never seen him deal with problems in a negative way. I feel comfortable coming to him with a problem," said a teacher associate." Another teacher associate summarized when she said, "I see Mr. Hinton as a guide who helps pull everything together, and not only from the teachers' viewpoints. A guide takes a lot of input from all, puts it all together, and makes a decision that benefits almost everyone involved."

I observed Hinton's problem solving approach to a major issue, watched him gather input, write it all down, and eventually arrive at a decision. An in-depth description of that process, his response to concern about funding uncertainty and its impact on faculty stress and student learning, is beyond the scope of this paper. Commenting briefly, he moved from a perception early in the year that teacher morale was low, through an

information gathering and problem analysis process, to planning, replanning and finally implementation of a major program adjustment, the separation of the K-1 multi-age classrooms into kindergarten and first grade rooms. Movement among the classrooms in a village, depending upon the individual learning needs of children, will still occur. The move to separate the classes, partially in response to overburdened teachers who were having to handle alone a program designed to be delivered by two adults, responds to funding uncertainties that predictably leave some rooms understaffed at beginning of each year. He has called it a move to stabilize the program. The separation also responds to information about difficulties with transition and differences in performance experienced by the first children from the center to be in second grade classrooms in their neighborhood schools this year. Those children who had been in the primary classrooms staffed the entire year by two adults were performing well above average, while the children whose classrooms had been understaffed were not. Hinton wants all the children to be successful and understands if children do not perform well in second grade that parent perception about the quality of the center would change. He also cares about the staff, understands that they are people with personal as well as professional lives, and that caring for the children is dependent upon staff feeling cared for and good about themselves too. A second decision made during this period of time was to put the request for parent participation into even stronger language. Parents who will not become involved to the degree required will be asked to take their children out of the program. The Parent Advisory Council and staff were major voices in these decisions.

In addition to responding to problems and getting input when making problem-solving decisions, staff report that Ken goes the extra mile to solve problems. If he does not know how to resolve a situation he will find a person who does. If resources are not immediately available, he will find them and if necessary he will even use his own resources. As the home school facilitator said "I've gone to him about quite a few children's needs. He always says don't worry about it. We have the resources. I think

often they come from his own pocket. He has said to me that the pupils must have what they need. He helps work out situations with families and really cares about what happens." A secretary explained that "whenever someone is in need, it doesn't matter what, he will contribute to making it better. If a parent comes in without money to pay the entire rent or phone bill, he reaches into his own pocket to make sure they do when they leave. I've seen him do that. If they need a job he will look into that and write a recommendation if he feels good about that." Hinton gives the staff permission to also be flexible and make allowances when people have needs. He is seen as a person who will always find a way if there is a need and as unafraid to tackle any problem.

He keeps the mission focused and central.

One teacher described Hinton as "a truly inspirational leader." Said another, "He shares vision and brings us together as a team, working together." The professional development coordinator described how "he talks caring to teachers. He brings it out as a value and responsibility to the children." The speech pathologist believes that "Mr. Hinton's philosophy and enthusiasm pervade the entire center." A teacher associate elaborated, "He lets us know what he expects for the children, not for himself. None of it is for him but for the children and their families. He's got a beautiful vision. You just want to be part of it. He bases everything on the truth. Even if it might hurt him he will not lie. The truth keeps the vision going." "Mr. Hinton's rule is that the children are always first," said the cafeteria manager. A teacher's words provide the best summary: "His main concern is families and children, that they be content and have what they need. He does not waiver in his commitment to the vision. If I've heard it once I've heard it 1000 times. We will do what's best for the children. There is a lot of safety and security in working for someone like that."

The vision is not just his. In fact it was a vision several years in the making, its broad outlines developed by a representative community task force. But Hinton's total commitment has focused the vision and given it heart as he and others have shaped it. One

teacher explained that "the vision is so deeply embedded in all of us. It's what we want for children and families so that even if we are sometimes overwhelmed the discussion keeps going." A person from the cafeteria was also articulate: "Everyone's goal is the same. Our vision for the kids is basically the same -- healthy, happy children in a safe environment, and excellence. We are all involved in accomplishing these goals." A teacher stated with conviction: "We all hope that this will change our world and the future for our children. That's why we are all here." Such unity of purpose is one reason for the school's unique environment. As a teacher said, "in my fifteen years of experience I have never seen such a unified staff, dedicated to the common good. Ken sets the tone and we know he will take the children's side." Staff dedication is manifested as every person in the building shows warmth and caring toward the children. "*Our children* is what is emphasized. It is our responsibility to always make parents feel part of the school. He brings that all together," said a teacher.

Finally, Hinton's high standards play a role in keeping the mission focused and central. He is known as a leader who expects a great deal, but gives what he expects. He has high standards for the children, parents, and staff. He has gotten the community involved and serves as a spokesperson for the school in countless ways and arenas. In addition, "he is very vocal about child advocacy and encourages this in us by modeling it," said a teacher. "He's a loving person. He's caring and he is totally engrossed in the well being of the children. You treat the children wrong in any way and you bring down his wrath," said a staff member.

It seems important to say that he also models imperfections. As one person said, "One last thing -- Ken is no God. I am not trying to make like he is. When he makes a mistake he will tell us. He is just like anyone else, asks us for advice about how to solve a problem. You don't lean on him as if he's perfect, because he's not. He doesn't want anyone to fail, and we need to encourage him too, because he's a model of this to, of needing to be encouraged."

Summary and Implications

This paper began with a description of parents in dialogue with each other and Hinton, a dialogue that took my understanding of caring in schools to a new level. On February 22, 1996, the day after the final parent meeting, Hinton sent a note to parents that concluded with this paragraph about these classroom get-togethers:

> We had our last visit on February 21. Parents let me thank all of you who took time out of your busy schedules to spend a little time with me so I could have the privilege of getting to talk and share with you. It truly was a most enjoyable pleasure and I sincerely thank you for it. Hopefully this will just be the beginning for us to continue to know each other better so that our children can be the best they can be.

The language of this letter is quite personal and reflects in the phrase "most enjoyable pleasure" why Hinton had scheduled the meetings in the first place. As he told each group of parents, he had asked them to come because he realized that he did not know enough of them personally, could only call about half of the children in school by name, and therefore he was missing the full joy of his work. I am reminded of Noddings (1984) words that "our view, rooted as it is in relation, identifies joy as a basic human affect. . . . It is the recognition of and longing for relatedness that form the foundation of our ethic, and the joy that accompanies fulfillment of our caring enhances our commitment to the ethical ideal that sustains us as one-caring" (p. 6). Without the full experience of the joy of relatedness with all the children and parents, Hinton understood that something important was missing from his life and work. In one of our conversations Hinton told me that his "greatest joy is when the children do well," and that his second greatest joy is "when teachers grow into all they are capable of becoming."

A description of a parent meeting began this paper, followed by discussion of the purpose and place of the study, and aspects of a theoretical framework, including the work of Dillard, 1995; Gilligan, 1977; Starratt, 1991; Noblit, Rogers and McFadden, 1995;

Sylwester, 1995; Caine and Caine, 1991; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995; Lipsitz, 1995; and Beck, 1994. Words and illustrations supplied by staff members and parents have described the fundamentally caring environment of the Valeska Hinton Center; and the work of principal Ken Hinton has been described, first in terms of a typical day, and finally through the common perception of staff and parents that his primary contribution to the caring environment is as an *example of caring*.

Although seeing caring as existing in relations, Noddings (1984) has written that nevertheless "we shall have to discuss behavioral indicators of caring in some depth. . . . When we consider the possibility of institutional caring and what might be meant by the 'caring school,' we shall need to know what to look for" (p. 12). The description of the Valeska Hinton Center provides one answer to the question of what is meant by a caring school while the six statements describing Hinton suggest what caring of one educational leader looks like in terms of actions, attitude, and values. Whereas Beck (1995) proposes that caring educational leaders fit the three role labels of values-driven organizer, capable and creative pedagogue, and cultivator of a caring culture, Hinton seems best described in terms of Noddings (1984) essential components of caring -- action, reciprocity, and engrossment -- which she explains as located in the relation between the one-caring and the cared-for (pp. 9-12). That Hinton's caring takes the form of *action* is indicated in two of the six statements supported by the study: "He supports and encourages others as persons and professionals;" and "He listens and solves problems." The examples given for each of those behaviors have illustrated that he is a man of action. Secondly, at the heart of Hinton is the reality of an underlying attitude of *reciprocity*, illustrated in what has been said about how "He treats every person equally and with respect," and that "He does not limit himself or anyone else by or to a role." In a lengthy tape recorded interview, Hinton commented explicitly, without using the word, on the importance of reciprocity to caring when he said:

> Many teachers don't realize that children have something to offer, parents have something to offer them. . . . I have found that many teachers are reluctant to make

> home visits because they don't truly understand the purpose. In a lot of their minds it is "I am making a home visit to give information about the child, how he or she is doing in school" as opposed to I'm making a home visit to establish a relationship with the parents, let them know that we are doing this together. "I need a friend -- You need a friend". . . . You don't do that over the telephone. You don't do that through correspondence. There is a better way of meeting face to face. . . . We don't have to agree with each other. That may not ever take place. We do have to respect each other. We do have to know about each other . . . know that each of us have something to offer.

Knowing children by name, meeting with the parents, encouraging that teachers' home visits be about forming relationships of partnership with parents all illustrate Hinton's understanding of the reciprocity necessary for a caring relationship. It is not enough to say "I care" but caring must be offered through action in a way that honors the mutuality of the relationship. Finally, two statements describe how Hinton's caring demonstrates *engrossment*: "His use of time reveals his priorities," and "He keeps the mission focused and central." The previous illustrations of these two statements reveal Hinton's values. Because he values "the right of the essence of a person to be respected" he is never too busy to respond to human needs and will always take time for people. Because he values children, he is an unceasing advocate for children. Said a teacher, "I know at least five families that have changed, the way they parent, think, motivation in themselves, how they hold their heads up. If we can save five families, the souls involved in those families, that changes the world." A uniqueness of the Valeska Hinton Center is the commitment to working in partnership with parents. Educators here understand that "the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (Epstein, 1995, p. 701). As a result of the commitment to partnership with parents the circle of caring is enlarged and parents as well as children are growing in their understanding of caring and community.

The first day I talked with Hinton about my proposed research we sat at a table in his large office. Wearing a wine-colored shirt, brown slacks and suspenders, he was informal and relaxed, although mulling over a major concern. He shared that he was at the point of needing to cut back responsibilities for faculty in order to relieve them of the stress created by the financial cutbacks that had left eight classrooms without teacher associates. He had some ideas about what to do but was planning to talk with all staff individually or in small groups to get their input. He was very concerned about the phenomenon of burn-out, how to prevent it and also how to support teachers when their caring for students is seemingly not received by either the student or the parent. He also said several times that it would be easier not to care, and gave several examples of why. On the other hand, he shared a story from his teaching days of a difficult student, whom he never gave up on but who had really tried his patience. When he saw this person 15 years later the young man proceeded to say in a public place in quite a loud voice that Ken was the best teacher ever, and after all those years Hinton was able to feel good about not having given up on him, about how he had turned out in spite of all his un-promising eighth grade behaviors. As we talked further about teaching and schools, Ken framed the issue underlying burn-out as a question: "Is caring debilitating when no action expressing caring is able to alleviate or relieve the condition that has called forth the need for care?" Such a condition could be an abusive home situation, for example. He related how every week the center's Family Support Team meets to discuss how to help individual students and families who are having problems and in his words, "sometime the problems are overwhelming." I include this discussion in the conclusion of this paper to illustrate Ken's complexity, that his consistency as a caring person does represent an ethical commitment on his part, that even for him caring is sometimes difficult.

Theoretical implications of the study have been suggested throughout the paper. A caring school environment is fundamentally important to learning. A leader who is able to create a caring school environment values and respects persons of all ages and stages of

development, including parents, and contributes to creating a caring environment primarily through being a caring person. The most fundamental implication of this research for my work as a professor is understanding that I can not teach persons in my classes to be Ken Hintons. I can care for them, however, and I can also share with them on an intellectual level about the complexity of caring, particularly the idea that caring is only complete when received by the one cared-for. This is the understanding that too many well meaning educators do not have.

"Why should we care about caring? Because without caring, individual human beings cannot thrive, communities become violent battlegrounds, the American democratic experiment must ultimately fail, and the planet will not be able to support life" (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 665). Ultimately, however, we must each care in ways that are uniquely our own, realizing that caring moves from inside out, or it moves no one.

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